

St. John has La.'s highest cancer risk

EPA cites chemical at LaPlace plant

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LAPLACE - The approximately 43,000 people living in St. John the Baptist Parish share an unenviable distinction of having the highest potential risk of cancer in the state due to industrial releases into the air.

It's a relatively new distinction.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in December published a National Air Toxics Assessment map created to give

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state and federal agencies an idea of where more investigation is necessary.

"This is an issue we find very important," said Ron Curry, administrator of the EPA's Region 6, which includes Louisiana.

About 150 residents gathered last week to hear what state and federal officials had found and what their agencies, as well as the company that releases the chemical of most concern, chloroprene, are doing about the newly discovered issue.

For 45 years, DuPont produced neoprene, which uses chloroprene in its construction, at its LaPlace plant.

On Nov. 1, Denka Perfor-

mance Elastomer, of which 70 percent is owned by Denka Co. and 30 percent by Misui Co., both based in Tokyo, purchased the neoprene portion of the complex. Four days later, the company found out about the upcoming EPA risk map showing the concern about chloroprene.

"Since then, it has been our highest priority," said Jorge Lavastida, the plant manager at Denka.

The DuPont production of chloroprene went on for decades. In 2010, the EPA redesignated chloroprene as a chemical that likely causes cancer. The agency later came up with recommendations of what long-term exposure limits should be — limits that are drastically lower than what is currently

allowed.

Instead of 857 micrograms per cubic meter of air for an eight-hour average, the new recommended level for human health was 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter during a year.

The cancer risk maps estimated that the actual annual average was about 10 times the EPA-recommended health screening level, said Chuck Carr Brown, the state Department of Environmental Quality secretary.

Because the health screening standard is so new, the facility is operating well within the limits of its air permit. To address the new concerns, DEQ, EPA and the company are looking for ways to reduce chloroprene releases while going through a rule-making process that even-

tually will determine what the company is allowed to release, Brown said. The rule-making process can take several years.

Early this year, DEQ monitoring showed the presence of the chemical in LaPlace, which set off more monitoring from DEQ and EPA. The EPA monitoring, which will continue until at least November, is meant to get a better idea of what is actually in the air, rather than the estimates that the cancer risk map was based on.

The company also is setting up monitoring to get a better idea of just how much of the chemical is getting into the surrounding community, which includes four schools within a 2-mile radius of the plant along the Mississippi River.

Despite the elevated cancer

risk denoted by the EPA map, Louisiana's Tumor Registry doesn't show any elevated cancer numbers in the parish, Dr. Xiao-Chen Wu, director of the registry, told the crowd Thursday. In fact, she said, cancer rates are lower than state and national numbers for some sections of the population.

Because of the Tumor Registry numbers, Patrick Walsh, safety health and environmental manager with Denka, said the company has questions about the work EPA has done on the chemical.

EPA officials at the meeting said they are confident in their designation of the chemical as a likely cause of cancer.

The EPA, DEQ and the company pledged to residents that they would continue to meet

with the community and share progress.

The EPA has set up a specific webpage, www.epa.gov/la/laplace-st-john-baptist-parish-louisiana, for St. John the Baptist Parish that gives background on chloroprene, what is being done and monitoring information.

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